

**Communicating Organizational Brands Online & Offline:  
Social Identity Theory & User-Generated Content**

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## **Communicating Organizational Brands Online & Offline: Social Identity Theory & User-Generated Content**

### **Rationale**

Brands develop relationships with customers that determine how individuals will interact with others as it relates to their connection with brand identity. Clark (2014) argues that four archetypes are used in branding to attract customers: "...belonging, freedom, ego, and order. Each archetype corresponds to a specific type of consumer whom the brand wishes to attract, e.g., the everyday person or the caregiver" (p. 1853). These 'archetypes' consist of what consumers desire to feel in order to identify with a brand. The particular identity of individuals can be defined by their own perceptions of themselves and how others, including brands, may define them. The relativism of identity plays a major role in how brands determine to execute public relations campaigns. Brand building requires the ability to establish a connection between organizational identity and personal identity among audiences. Brands must also maintain an online presence that reflects their customer experience and identity. According to Kloetz and Tankersly (2016), "online communities are based on the creation and negotiation of meaning, which is related to the symbolic characteristics of products, brands and relationships" (p. 22). Individuals identify with these symbols on a regular basis. They use them to decide how to communicate with other individuals who can also be viewed as potential customers.

This analysis addresses the impact that online social networks have made on two-communication in the digital space. Brands must consistently engage with these audiences in a way that supports their views and needs. They are also able to interact with the responses of individuals who offer their feedback across networks. However, this creates a challenge for organizations who must present responses in real-time. If they fail to do so to the standards of

their supporters, they risk losing their audiences. The responsive nature of the online community allows brands to develop more distinct characteristics that separate them from competitors. Organizational brands depend on these relationships as such interactions continue to help determine their social and economic nature in the future. Organizations must foster relationships that are beneficial to the identities of individuals who choose to represent their principles by supporting their brand.

Ashforth and Mael (1989) propose the application of the social identity theory in organizational settings to display the dynamics of symmetrical communication that occurs among stakeholders. Tajfel and Turner's (1985) social identity theory addresses social identification, group identification and comparison. These concepts assist us with understanding how brands can influence the customer experience with a focus on how individuals identify and in what sense as it pertains to a brand's organizational identity. This analysis communicates how brands can further influence the perceptions of consumers in the current marketplace through the lens of the social identity theory.

### **Literature Review**

Organizations build their identities through interactions with consumers across social networks that serve as opportunities to establish extensive communicative relationships. Individuals and organizations exchange useful information at these communication points, and globalization continues to broaden the space for this to occur. Indeed, "...the social relations and the shared sense of identity that mark brand communities are constructed by members in their interaction" (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p. 729). The online marketplace offers organizational

brands access to the experiences of supporters who influence brand identity and others' views of it. Consumers share how they identify with a brand through direct responses to products where potential customers decide how they will interact with a brand: "Consumers will find out if a product or brand is recommended by other users on Twitter or Facebook, and they can also watch product demonstrations followed by reviews on sites like YouTube before they commit to a purchase" (Rosendale, 2015, p. 51). The user-experience shapes brand identities now more than ever as more people choose to engage with products on a more personal and public basis. There is greater value in shared experiences because consumers make decisions about brands and products in reference to these reviews.

Three communication dynamics define these organizational relationships between a brand and a consumer. First, user-generated content (UGC) is created by individuals to share their personal experience with a product across networks. This includes personal posts online such as video, audio or text posts authored and shared by individuals in digital spaces such as social media networks. They ultimately communicate how they identify with a brand in these moments. Next, supporters act as brand ambassadors once they choose to directly connect with them on social media when they interact with a page, for example. Lastly, two-way communication helps brands to establish communities that also influence dialogue among consumers and potential customers.

### **User-generated Content (UGC)**

User-generated content (UGC) empowers consumers to have influence on an organization's brand by self-curated means. It also serves as another access point for onlookers. They function as testimonies to a brand's identity in a variety of contexts. People are able to

upload a video of their interactions with their feedback, and these visuals give larger audiences a chance to engage with a brand from a distance. Brands also benefit from this because they are able to dictate how they are able to engage with customers and identify their supporters: “UGC has important practical implications for marketers. Communication managers can use UGC to pool the ideas of engaged consumers, while keeping communication costs low compared to traditional channels” (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016, p. 192). A customer identifies their relationship with a brand on their own terms. An organization can choose to use this content as a strategic tool in the promotion of their brand based on this identification. UGC promotes community among stakeholders which contributes to the brand identity of an organization. For instance, product reviews are user-generated tools used by others in social networks. The user gains exposure through these channels and the brand takes on a new identity through this experience. A person animates a product experience for audiences to share the results of their decision to support or deny a brand. Indeed, “Emotional appeals are designed to appeal to emotions by using mood, music, and other emotion-eliciting strategies. Informational appeals are designed to appeal to cognition by using objective information describing a brand’s attributes or benefits” (Akpinar & Berger, 2017, p. 319). These reviews act as promotional materials that feature real-life encounters with a brand, making it more accessible to people who may have heard of it or may be on the verge of supporting it. A consumer who chooses to share their experience in an online forum or in a review chooses to take the time to express their personal connection to a brand. User-generated content also affords organizations the resources to engage others with their products through social media posts made on brand profiles. The identity of the ideal consumer can shift based on given responses from both an organization and stakeholders.

These media products can make a brand more appealing in a social context. More people can be reached over time as they discern pieces of information from sources that include first-hand encounters.

### **Online Brand Ambassadors**

Social media platforms continue to influence the communicative nature of brands and their supporters. A direct encounter between individuals is not necessarily required in order for a person to develop a relationship with a brand. They may visit a brand's social media profile in order to make an impression on their relationships with engaged individuals. For example, ratings and comments can be left on Facebook business pages. They can be seen by anyone who views them. This information represents the brand as well as the individuals who choose to provide feedback. A person who takes the further step to make their experience known also agrees to identify with the brand: "Because brands serve as repositories of product information, the category-specific equity associated with successful brands should become stronger as consumers learn more about the performance of the brand in the category" (Nga, Carson, & Moore, 2013, p. 40). People learn about brands each day when they tune in to watch a review video. Even when people 'like' or 'follow' company pages on Facebook, their profiles are on display. This allows other potential customers to get an idea of who supports a brand and if they would like to identify as such: "...social media can make the identity of a brand's supporters transparent to prospective consumers in ways that have no offline analog" (Naylor, Lamberton, West, 2012, p. 105). People share moments of interaction with the identity of a brand with the

help of reactions from individuals who have experience with a product they may have decided to try.

The identity of a brand can also be shaped by the identities of engaged consumers. Others may or may not be able to identify with them or their experience with a product: “Brand identity contacts are all message-carrying interactions concerning the brand between the brand strategies and the brand stewards. Brand stewards are all internal and external entities (individuals and groups) that have responsibility for communicating the brand to customers, prospects, and publics” (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, & McDonald, 2005, p. 72). These contacts determine how communication will be regarded over time. This communication of the brand is what individuals rely on so it is important for organizations to project particular ideas shared by loyal customers. They speak for the brand, and this is another way to encourage conversation as well as further interaction with a product’s promotional media materials. They may watch several reviews to determine what fits their desires and needs as a potential supporter.

### **Two-Way Communication**

The connections discussed above become tools for brands to gain more brand loyalty. This also projects the identity of a brand through the interactions of both a brand and individuals who are trying out a product: “...the notion of brand identification suggests that consumers develop relationships with a brand due to the ability of that brand to contribute to the identity consumers would like to obtain or maintain” (Lin & Sung, 2014, p. 57). Consumers represent themselves also when they create media products that display their experience with a brand. They reflect upon the best representation of themselves while in the process of recording their experiences. Through this reflection individuals understand more of the emotions and feelings

that are attached to brands when it comes to the context of the relationships other people have developed after making a purchase. Brands depend on this communication to maintain organizational practices by implementing changes they see fit based on customer feedback. People interact with brands as if they are people and examine all of their characteristics before dedicating their support to an organization: “Consumers tend to endow brands with human characteristics that result in a brand personality, which consists of five dimensions—sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness” (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 54). Consumers’ views of an organization depends on how these relationships develop and how supporters reflect their identity with a brand. This promotes brand loyalty as more people identify with these labels. They desire to associate themselves with a trustworthy brand that prioritizes their customer experience.

Organizations appeal to the moral character of consumers because they aim to gain this trust from anyone who engages with their brand. Brand identity depends on the communicative relationships between brands and active organizational members in private and public spaces. People refer to their experiences with brands which are iterations of how they identify with them: “marketers should ensure that the communications eliciting moral identity are presented near the point of purchase or at the final stages of the decision-making process (e.g., point-of-purchase advertising displays, storefront signs eliciting moral identity)” (Woo & Winterich, 2013, p. 107). This is why it has become critical for brands to develop a more productive relationship with their customer base. People imagine their experiences with a brand through the functions of products and in support of their moral identities. Anyone who chooses to support promotions of products shares this information or uses it to decide how they will interact with a product. The customer



experience is based in this relationship of morality which also promotes brand loyalty: “branded social media activities can be used to increase brand awareness and brand liking, promote customer engagement and loyalty, inspire consumer word-of-mouth communication about the brand, and potentially drive traffic to brand locations on and offline” (Ashley & Tuten, 2015, p. 17). This communication may not be directed at any particular brand representative, but a brand’s reputation is influenced by these exchanges between supporters and potential customers.

The social identity of a brand determines how others will choose to interact with information related to it. The social identity of an individual can shape a person’s perspective of the social identity of a brand. A brand benefits from an ideal consumer’s appeal to the public. They influence the relationship that others may have with a brand which could encourage them to develop a similar relationship through these exchanges: “...social identities are intensely personal as they care as much about the outcomes of the social group as about their own personal outcomes. In that sense, identity fusion may be particularly important when facing challenges to one’s personal or social identities” (Lin & Sung, 2014, p. 58). Several identities meet in communicative relationships between customers and organizations. Organizational brand identity is rooted in these dynamics, and social media networks create more opportunities for people to interact with a brand on their own terms. This can work in favor of a brand or against the essence of their identity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Tajfel and Turner’s (1985) social identity theory focuses on social and group identification: “...people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories

such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender and age cohort (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 79). This allows for comparison among groups from an individual and social perspective. A person chooses to identify with a brand based on their associations with these categories. According to Ashforth and Mael (1989) these identifications influence how we view the social interactions around us and how people choose to identify themselves in these contexts. We compare the relationships we maintain among social groups which impacts how we view other groups including brands.

Organizations influence these dynamics in exchanges with a variety of individuals who identify with different social groups. Indeed, “[Social identity theory] maintains that the individual identifies with social categories partly to enhance self-esteem” (Hogg & Turner, 1985, p. 142). This plays a role in how individuals choose to identify with organizations. A person reflects on the context of their social position to decide if a brand identity complements their perceptions of their self-identity: “To identify, an individual need not expend toward the group’s goals; rather, an individual need only perceive him- or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Therefore, a person’s identification with a brand depends on how that brand allows them to view their relationships with other consumers. These social relationships are relative: “..we regard a brand as a relationship partner that is important to (1) the private self, such that individual customers use the brand to define who they are, and (2) the social self, such that these customers consider themselves part of an in-group of customers who identify with the same brand” (Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010, p. 130). Ideas about in-group and out-group relationships determine how a person will identify with a brand and what it represents. Individuals develop perceptions of the relativity of a

brand's principles based on how they perceive the brand in a social context as well. People express their identities through brands, and organizations cater to marketing messages that these individuals can identify with: "Since identity-defining messages explicitly link identity expression to a particular behavior, they should better serve consumers' drive to define and express their identity, relative to identity-referencing messages" (Bhattacharjee, Berger, & Menon, 2014, p. 296). These individuals refer to reinforcements of their identity through these messages. They are able to conceptualize a role in them and act upon decisions to support or disregard what they may see or hear.

Individuals choose to identify with a brand based on how this relationship develops through interactions with media and products or services. The social identity theory focuses on the social and personal categorizations that lead individuals to establish relationships with concepts and entities. Brands appeal to characteristics that individuals possess in order to engage them over time through images and taglines that reinforce their qualities. Individuals place value in brands that reinforce their identity through personal connections that sometimes lead to brand loyalty and longevity.

### **Conclusion**

Organizations develop a series of relationships with the personal and social identities of individuals through connections made by strategic public relations campaigns. Brands maintain their reputations based on how their organizational identity is reflected within social spaces. Individuals choose to identify with brands that they develop personal connections with. Today's marketplace offers advantages and challenges as it concerns both consumers and organizations.

The analyses of scholars track the constant development of these relationships in digital spaces around the world. Social identity theory helps to explore concepts that address communicative and psychological aspects of brand identity as it relates to social or personal identity.

Brands must meet consumers where they are as they are with conceivable intentions.

User-generated content (UGC) presents a unique challenge to organizations that have no control over how a person chooses to express how they identify with a brand. This leads organizations to tailor messaging that addresses these interactions to either confirm or deny their content.

Individuals who engage with brands online can be viewed as supporters who identify with a brand's principles. Their actions resemble that of a brand ambassador. Two-way communication continues to be of the essence as organizations aim to reach more individuals through personalized experiences. These concepts define how this marketplace continues to shift to a more consumer-based nature with transparency and authenticity as guiding forces.

Tajfel and Turner's (1985) social identity theory implicates that organizations must remain engaged with how their brand identity is reflected in the internal and external experiences of their customers. The relationships that others develop with brands all depends on how the brands present themselves in social spaces. A brand's online presence can encourage or discourage someone from interacting with promotional materials and products. Indeed, "...brand authenticity requires both distinctiveness and a connection to the social context, which includes an understanding of norms and traditions" (Mazutis & Slawinski, p. 124). Norms in today's marketplace involve social media platforms which provide more access to customers' interactions with a brand as well as a brand's organizational identity. However, the challenge to connect with individuals continues to present a barrier to brands. They must foster relationships

in niche environments which thrive in the online business industry. Further study should explore connection points for particular categories of brands from the fashion industry to the nonprofit sector. They should address two-way communication and its limits during online interaction. The distinctiveness of brands all depends on how brand representatives express brand identity to supporters and potential customers. Organizations must appeal to their brand identity in a sense that highlights their innovative nature and their effort to identify with consumers.

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